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**College Prerequisites in Law Enforcement**

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**An Administrative Research Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The establishment of college prerequisites for police officers is a matter of wide debate among law enforcement administrators. There exists a belief that higher education fashions a more professional police force and officers who are better equipped to handle the demands of modern policing. There is also a belief that college mandates do not provide sufficient benefit to overcome the recruiting issues that accompany them. For these reasons the benefits of college prerequisites must be weighed against the ability of individual police departments to effectively recruit officers in light of education mandates.

In order to assess the proliferation of college prerequisites within individual departments, a sample of local police administrators were surveyed regarding the hiring and promotional practices of their respective departments. Administrators were surveyed and asked their preferences regarding the educational and military backgrounds of police applicants. The survey results indicated that there is a concern among administrators that such prerequisites will narrow the labor pool and increase the difficulty of recruiting. Further resistance to these recommendations results was indicated in recognizing the progress made by administrators and police officers who do not possess college degrees. Responses indicated that a vast majority of administrators preferred college educated officers over those without higher education, yet there was little preference for advanced schooling over military experience. Despite the practices of a number of agencies requiring college, the resistance to college mandates remains in Texas.

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## INTRODUCTION

As early as the 1930's, higher education was considered critical to the forward evolution of professionalism in Law Enforcement. The issue was raised again during the tumultuous decade of the 1960's. In 1973, the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals (NAC) recommended the institution of a minimum standard for employment increase to the requirement of a baccalaureate degree by 1982. As recently as 1999, only 26.6 percent of more than seven hundred law enforcement agencies in the state of Texas required more than a high school diploma or GED. According to a survey report on the activities of Texas law enforcement agencies, only 1.1 percent of Texas agencies required a bachelor's degree as a prerequisite for employment. Moreover, the evolution of professionalism in law enforcement has not taken the expected path.

In 1949 the Texas Legislature enacted Texas Fire and Police Civil Service. One of the articles of the statute provided for additional points to entrance examination scores in the case of military service. The primary purpose of this provision was to provide an advantage to military veterans seeking employment in a competitive job market following a war.

In 1970 the State of Texas established minimum educational standards for the licensure of peace officers in the state through the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education. According to the Texas Administrative Code Chapter 37, the Current Rules of the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education, Section 217.1 allows that an honorable discharge after two years service in the military has the same effect as sixty hours of college in

reducing the minimum age requirement for licensure as a peace officer from twenty-one years to eighteen years.

In December 1997 the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education (T.C.L.E.O.S.E.) conducted a survey of peace officers across the State of Texas in part to determine the feasibility of increasing the minimum standard education level required for licensure. Despite historical precedence, military experience does not appear to fit into the T.C.L.E.O.S.E. equation, as it was not mentioned in the aforementioned survey instrument. There is a question as to whether or not Texas law enforcement agencies would be more accepting of a college mandate if military experience was presented as a minimum equivalent.

The research for this study will consist of a review of literature in order to establish the benefits of degreed professionals in law enforcement. Additionally, a survey will be conducted to determine whether or not law enforcement agencies hiring military veterans as an equivalent will benefit in the same areas. The survey will also serve to establish whether or not agencies are more receptive to educational mandates if military equivalents are permitted.

It is anticipated that Texas law enforcement agencies will indicate indifference between the benefits provided by a college degree and the benefits provided by military service. The research should also reveal additional benefits of hiring from a labor pool with diverse life experiences, such as military and college experiences. Further, it is hypothesized that many law enforcement agencies would be more receptive to state mandated college requirements if military equivalents are permitted.

The law enforcement profession established college requirements as a goal more than seventy years ago. While the goal has been restated in every decade since the 1960's, the state of Texas has not moved any closer to the goal. The fifty-year relationship between law enforcement and military veterans should be recognized. Acknowledging this relationship may be the key to increasing the minimum educational standards established thirty years ago.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

As the foundation of this paper concerns action, or potential action, by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education, the initial literature reviewed was the Executive Summary of *The Impact of Human resource development Activities on the Career Development and Professionalism of Texas Peace Officers* by Dr. Craig Campbell. Campbell (1997) suggests that peace officers who have more hours of college: will score higher on professionalism inventories, will be promoted more frequently, and will make higher salaries. While the collected data supports the second and third hypotheses, college hours did not correlate to an increase in professionalism as Campbell predicted. Campbell still recommends that "a definite amount of college education should be required for entry into the profession" (p.5). Campbell further suggests that State implement an education standard of a bachelor's degree by the year 2004. College should be required at supervisory levels, according to Campbell, mandating 60 hours for first line supervisors and a bachelor's degree for command positions. Campbell further recommends that department heads should have a college degree without substitutions for training hours or experience.

In 1999 the Texas Commission on Law enforcement Officer Standards and Education surveyed the opinions of administrator's in Texas law enforcement agencies. In this survey 60.7 percent of departments favored a high school minimum or less, while 36.9 percent favored a sixty hour minimum. According to *The Opinions of Texas Law Enforcement Administrators* (1999), the size of the department did impact the responses since "50 percent of the agencies with more than 25 officers favored 60 hours or more of college" and the type of department also impacted the responses as "81.8 percent of sheriffs' departments responded that a high school diploma was the appropriate entry standard" (p. 11). The survey further indicates that the opinions of administrators changes slightly when considering promotion as "51.4 percent of respondents indicated a preference of sixty-hours or more of college" for promotional eligibility (p. 11).

Another survey issued by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Standards and Education in 1999 reflected the activities of Texas law enforcement agencies. This survey indicated that "better than 73% of the agencies hold to the state minimum of a GED or high school education" (p. 13). Practices in this regard tend to change with agency size as larger agencies are more likely to require some college or a degree. Most agencies do not require college for promotion, with only 6.6% requiring sixty hours or more.

There is a great deal of literature indicating support for the establishment of college requirements as a prerequisite for law enforcement. This support for degreed police professionals started as early as 1918 in Berkley California through the efforts of Police Chief August Vollmer. In the January 1991 issue of *Law and Order*, Richard

Mahan credits Vollmer with “encouraging officers to attend classes in police administration taught each summer at the University of California” (p. 282). Vollmer continued his push for educated officers by recruiting college students from the university. Mahan states that administrators should cite from a number of advantages in support of college education for police officers. Some of the advantages listed by Mahan include:

A broader base of information for decision making; it allows for additional years and experiences for maturity; course requirements and achievements inculcate responsibility in the individual, both general education courses and course work in the major permit the individual to learn more about the history of the country, the democratic process and an appreciation for constitutional rights, values and the democratic form of government. (p.285)

Other advantages listed by Mahan emphasize enhanced communication skills, enhanced decision-making ability, and professional demeanor. Mahan (1991) does acknowledge that there is a debate regarding a required course of study for law enforcement professionals. He further states that there is an “inference from case law that there is no need to stipulate a major because it is the college experience in toto which is important” (p. 286).

The social unrest of the 1960s brought the practices and professionalism of law enforcement to the nation’s attention and the higher education of officers was the resulting recommendation. The first of two commission reports surfaced in 1967 with *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*, in which the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice suggested that “the ultimate aim of all police



departments should be that all personnel with general enforcement powers have baccalaureate degrees” (p. 109). In 1973 the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals (1973) noted that the minimum education level for many police agencies remained a high school education. The commission did recommend that by 1982 every police agency should require 120 semester hours or a baccalaureate degree (p. 369).

In 1992, Tyre and Braunstein suggested that a general course of study for law enforcement officers would place emphasis on the “ethical and aesthetic development of the individual” (p.6). Tyre and Braunstein dedicated the promotion of ethical development to improve the decision making of officers in “ethical and moral, as well as procedural and legal questions” (p. 6). Tyre and Braunstein conducted studies of Florida police officers and concluded that “officers who had at least a two-year college degree performed better than those who did not” and that “a positive correlation exists between college education, better police performance, and ethical police behavior” (p. 10).

A police study cited by J.T. Krimmel in 1996 provided 205 officers from two departments a list of 45 performance indicators including: ability to accept responsibility, problem-solving ability, preparedness for court, and knowledge of the law. The officers “possessing a bachelor’s degree or higher scored better in almost all performance indicator categories” (p.93).

There are a number of sources which raise question as to the wisdom of requiring college education for officers. In D.E. Patterson suggested in his 1991 *Law and Order* article that, while there is a necessity for increased education for officers,

there is a cost in acquiring them. Patterson (1991) promotes the idea that “educated officers will not remain content to follow the orders and directions of others. They will demand input and the ability to speak out regarding their views” (p. 71). While Patterson does not suggest that anarchy would result from the employment of educated officers, an alternate management style would be required.

In a 1994 article for *Law and Order*, A. Vodicka states that the developed communications skills, racial awareness, and ethical awareness of college educated officers would “promote a professional demeanor” in law enforcement agencies (p. 93). Vodicka suggests that college educated officers would get frustrated from a “lack of challenges” resulting in higher turn over rates (p. 93).

Another question is raised in a study by Kappeler, Sapp and Carter which states that college educated officers generated “significantly fewer founded citizen initiated complaints” however, officers with four-year college degrees “generated more founded department-generated complaints for rule violations” (p. 44). While there may be a significant difference in the culture of the general public and the law enforcement community, the situational reasoning ability that is touted of college graduates may show limited adaptability between the two cultures.

There have been limited studies regarding the military experience of police officers. In a 1978 study, D. Lester examines the relationship between dogmatism and job satisfaction. This study indicates that years of experience, department size, and education levels are not associated with job satisfaction, but officers with prior military service displayed more job satisfaction than those with no military background (p.962).

Lester also concludes that educated officers are less likely to exhibit dogmatism in their professional attitudes.

In a 2002 study, George T. Patterson examined the correlation between military experience and lower stress levels and hypothesizes that the paramilitary model of law enforcement agencies would result in lower stress levels for police officers with military experience. Patterson (2002) indicates that there is no such correlation. However, military experience did correlate to less education. Higher education levels correlated with higher rank, which correlated to higher incidence of organizational issues, which reported higher stress levels.

Much of the literature regarding education levels and military experience places focus on the qualities of potential police officers. The emphasis is not on the creation of a program to train the prototypical law enforcement officer, but rather to develop the broad range of skills that are required of a professional police officer.

The literature is fairly consistent in that it identifies a number of expectations that society demands of the law enforcement community including, communication skills, situational reasoning ability, responsibility, and knowledge of the law. The literature also debates that a college education is the best solution to meeting these demands.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The question to be examined considers whether or not law enforcement agencies would be more receptive to college prerequisites at the state level if military service equivalencies were permitted. Provided the extensive paramilitary foundations of law enforcement, it is anticipated that Texas law enforcement agencies will indicate an indifference between the benefits provided by a college degree and the benefits

provided by military service. The literature indicates that there are benefits of hiring from a labor pool with diverse life experiences, such as military and college experiences. Further, it is hypothesized that many law enforcement agencies would be more receptive to State mandated college requirements if military equivalents are permitted.

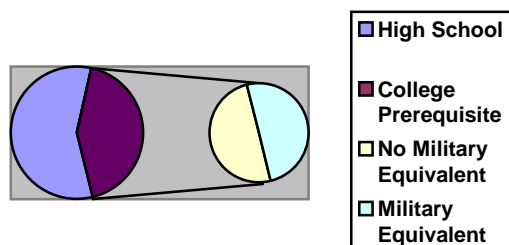
A survey was conducted to determine the practices of law enforcement agencies that require college education and whether or not military experience was considered in meeting the college prerequisite. The survey also questioned the preferences of individual police administrators with regard to educational prerequisites. Additionally, the survey included consideration for educational prerequisites for promotion and was distributed to police administrators in state, county, and municipal police agencies across the state. The survey was returned and completed by 53 percent of administrators surveyed.

The information obtained will be processed according to the practices of agencies currently working under college prerequisites to determine the prevalence of military equivalencies for initial hiring. The data will also be evaluated to determine the prevalence of college prerequisites for promotion. The question of whether or not administrators prefer a military equivalence under state mandated educational prerequisites will be explored. Finally, the data will be analyzed to determine a correlation between the agencies with established prerequisites and police administrators with preferences for state mandated college prerequisites.

## FINDINGS

The findings of the research addressed the practices of law enforcement agencies that require college education and whether or not military experience was considered in meeting the college prerequisite; the prevalence of college prerequisites for promotion; the preferences of individual police administrators with regard to educational prerequisites; and preference for military equivalence given state mandated educational prerequisites.

The survey indicated that 42.4 percent of agencies responding had a college requirement for entry level peace officer positions. This information varied somewhat from the 73.4 percent of agencies requiring only high school according to the survey conducted by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education. (*Survey report on the Activities of Texas Law Enforcement Agencies*, p.13). Of the agencies requiring any amount of college at the entry level, military was considered an equivalent in 50.0 percent of the agencies. Only 28.2 percent of the agencies allowing for a military exception mandate that officers meet college requirement subsequent to employment. Additionally, 71.4 percent of agencies with a college requirement will consider law enforcement experience as a substitute for the college requirement.



This information tends to support the contention that the agencies with a college prerequisite are receptive to the premise that the experiences of college and military life are beneficial to the law enforcement profession.

Looking at the agencies without college requirements for employment, only 15.7 percent had established college requirements for promotion to a position other than that of department head. Half of the departments surveyed, which require college for promotion, initiate the requirement at the Sergeant rank, while the other half initiate the requirement at the Lieutenant rank. This is a difficult area to evaluate due to the discrepancies found within the same job title between any two separate law enforcement agencies, especially those departments with limited size. First-line supervisors within the Pearland Police Department hold the rank of Corporal, while the first-line supervisors within the Houston Police Department hold the rank of Sergeant. Similarly, division commanders within the Pearland Police Department hold the rank of Lieutenant, while the division commanders of the Friendswood Police Department hold the rank of Captain.

With regard to the preferences of the administrators responding to the survey, 28.5 percent of administrators in agencies with college prerequisites supported state mandated prerequisites. This support was in stark contrast to the 5.3 percent support from administrators from agencies without departmental college prerequisites. Overall, only 15.2 percent of administrators advocated the mandate. Considering that 57.6 percent of administrators indicated a preference for college-educated candidates over high school-educated candidates, the considerable lack of support for the mandate is surprising.

Perhaps the most interesting information reflected in the survey is the support for a military equivalent in the event of a state mandated college prerequisite. Given the state mandate 73.3 percent of administrators responding favored the use of military as a college equivalent. An identical 56.7 percent of respondents indicated a preference of candidates with military experience over candidates with only high school, however; only 15.2 percent of the responses indicated that college experience was preferred over military experience. This information was consistent regardless of the college requirement of the respondents' departments.

Support for the establishment of a college requirement for promotion did not increase among responses. The data indicated an identical 15.1 percent approval of college as a state mandated requirement for promotion. In a separate survey conducted by the Pearland Police Officers' Association, 30.2 percent of police officers within the department supported the establishment of college prerequisites for supervisors in that department.

## **DISCUSSION**

For nearly three-quarters of a century, law enforcement has acknowledged that the path to recognition as a profession is dependent upon the education of its members. Law enforcement has been resistant to that change. Currently, the State of Minnesota is the only state which mandates a two or four year degree for its peace officers. While the State of Texas has improved educational requirements for peace officers by increasing the mandated in-service training requirements, the stated goals have not been reached. As stated by Dr. Campbell in his report to the Texas Commission on

Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education, “If medicine had kept it's 1910 standard, a doctor today would not have to be a high school graduate” (p.7).

In order to move toward a professional standard, it is proposed that consideration must be given to the historical relationship between peace officers and military experience. The purpose of this study was to validate military experience for consideration as an educational equivalent. This validation would not only increase acceptance of college prerequisites, but also accelerate their implementation.

It was hypothesized that law enforcement agencies in Texas would be more receptive to college mandates if a military equivalent were permitted. While the information collected indicates that agencies are still resistant to college requirements, there are some indications that military equivalents would facilitate the transition to college mandates. Specifically, only 15.2 percent of administrators surveyed indicated a preference of college educated candidates over those with military experience. Military experience, like college experience, helps in the maturation process for police candidates. The general lack of distinction between college experience and military experience may correlate to Mahan's assertion regarding the importance of the college experience over a specific field of study.

The data reflected that 73.3 percent of administrators preferred a military equivalent if given a college mandate. This finding could have different causes. First, considering the 84.8 percent of administrators that did not favor college mandates, the cause could easily be an attempt to mitigate the perceived problems that would arise given a college mandate. Secondly, this could reflect the general indifference that



administrators have regarding candidates with college experience compared to candidates with military experience.

Although the literature outlining the benefits of military experience in a law enforcement career is limited, the research findings tend to support the hypothesis. Administrators would be more receptive to educational mandates if military equivalents were provided. However, despite any increased receptiveness, the level of acceptance is still low.

If Texas law enforcement is to take steps toward adopting college prerequisites, some attention to the historical relationship between law enforcement and military experience is due. There are still major questions regarding the homogeneity of military experience and the related benefits to law enforcement, however; the same questions arise when considering college experience.

Many questions remain regarding college requirements for law enforcement. Should a Criminal Justice degree be required for a law enforcement career in the same manner that an Accounting degree is required for a Certified Public Accountant? Are there benefits to be obtained from diversity in education? What are the benefits to be obtained from peace officers with degrees in accounting, chemistry, computer science, sociology, biology, economics, English, or mathematics?

Similarly, what areas of military expertise are beneficial to law enforcement? Should Military Police experience be required of candidates having only military experience? Are there benefits to be obtained from officers with military experience in aviation, communications, medicine, electronics, computers, weapon systems, and tactical operations? These skills provide practical knowledge and ability to law

enforcement in critical areas that cannot be limited to a classroom setting. Acknowledging this potential may be of assistance on establishing educational prerequisites.

Addressing the problem of educational prerequisites may be facilitated by military equivalents, but further acceptance may be gained by tying the college requirement to promotional opportunity. The survey reflected identical lack of support, 15.2 percent, from administrators for mandating college for promotion, while an internal departmental survey of rank and file officers showed that 30.2 percent of Pearland Police officers supported the college requirement for promotion. This approach would not divest officers of their authority or prevent candidates from pursuing law enforcement as a profession. Rather, it would create career and educational goals for officers competing for a limited number of supervisory positions and increase the average education of peace officers.

Civil Service agencies across the State conduct promotional examinations on a regular basis to determine eligibility for promotion. Officers spend countless hours studying material covered on exams in order to compete for a limited number of supervisory positions. There is a general consensus in the literature that college prerequisites would contribute to the professionalism of law enforcement. If this premise is true of law enforcement as a whole, then the premise should hold true for the supervisory subset of law enforcement. Should the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education proceed with establishing a college prerequisite for supervisory personnel, then officers aspiring to be candidates for these

position will acquire the college education necessary to meet the requirement for promotion.

The study was limited by the lack of return of survey information. A great deal of information was returned via the internet, while a limited number of mailed surveys were returned. This resulted in a greater number of larger departments responding to the survey. Larger departments have more tolerance for educational requirements and this discrepancy may have been reflected in the survey results. However, as this tolerance is taken into consideration, less support for college prerequisites is anticipated with increased support for military equivalents for mandated college prerequisites.

The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education will likely continue to counter resistance in establishing college prerequisites for law enforcement officers. Considering the size and diversity of the law enforcement population in Texas, the Commission would benefit from a new approach that does not make wholesale changes in the law enforcement educational requirements. Establishment of college requirements at the command level would affect a limited number of officers. This could evolve into a college prerequisite for first-line supervisors. Finally, adoption of a college prerequisite for initial licensure could be implemented and facilitated by establishing a military equivalent to a two year degree.

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